

## Race and Ethnicity

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Is racial prejudice on the rise in the United States?

*Racism persists in the United States, according to recent polls, even as the country is projected to become a majority-minority country within 30 years. Except for Asians, ethnic groups continue to trail white Americans on most economic indicators, but minorities are flexing their electoral muscle, with blacks and Hispanics largely attributed with handing President Barack Obama his win last fall over Republican challenger Mitt Romney. As a result, both major political parties are courting Hispanic voters. Many also predict that the growing power of the Hispanic voting bloc could finally prod Congress to overcome its longstanding divide on comprehensive immigration reform and overhaul the nation's immigration laws. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court on June 25 effectively eliminated a key provision of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, considered the civil rights movement's crowning achievement.*

Despite the re-election of America's first African-American president, recent surveys reveal that racism still exists among Americans, along with a general perception that race relations have not improved since Barack Obama was first elected in 2008. Minorities continue to lag behind whites in most conventional measures of success. And by 2043 whites will no longer make up the majority of the U.S. population. Both major political parties are courting minorities' favor after political analysts credited Obama's comfortable 2012 win over Republican candidate Mitt Romney to overwhelming support from black and Hispanic voters. Immigration reform, long on Washington's back burner, has become a congressional priority, while some state legislatures are enacting laws aimed at limiting immigration. As those laws are being challenged in the lower courts — usually successfully — the U.S. Supreme Court made major rulings on the Voting Rights Act and affirmative action, two of the bedrock accomplishments of the civil rights movement.

## Disparities Continue

A 2012, a *Newsweek-Daily Beast* poll, taken before the president's re-election, indicated that most Americans felt that race relations had stagnated or deteriorated during Obama's first



Supporters of the landmark 1965 Voting Rights Act rally at the statehouse in Columbia, S.C., on Feb. 26, 2013. The next day, the U.S. Supreme Court heard a case challenging a section of the act requiring South Carolina and other states with histories of discriminatory voting practices to obtain federal approval for any changes in their voting laws. (Getty Images/Richard Ellis)

term, even though his 2008 election as the nation's first African-American president was hailed by some analysts as evidence that the country had entered a "post-racial" era. At the time, 70 percent of Americans said they were optimistic that relations between blacks and whites would improve under his presidency. <sup>1</sup>

But according to the survey, blacks and whites agree that racial stereotyping still exists, although whites are much more likely than blacks to believe there is no discrimination in access to affordable housing, jobs or justice. <sup>2</sup> Another 2012 poll — by The Associated Press — found that racial prejudice had increased among Americans in the previous four years, with a majority holding explicit or implicit anti-black and anti-Hispanic prejudices. <sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, despite a half century of legislative action and judicial rulings intended to eliminate the effects of racial discrimination — and some demonstrable progress — ethnic minorities in the United States generally lag behind whites in areas that traditionally define success, including:

- During the fourth quarter of 2012, unemployment among whites stood at 6.3 percent; for Hispanics it was 9.8 percent; for blacks, 14.0 percent. <sup>4</sup>
- The median household net worth for whites is 22 times that of blacks, 15 times that of Hispanics and 1.6 times that of Asian-Americans, according to the most recent Census Bureau figures. <sup>5</sup>
- The poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites is 9.9 percent compared to 25.8 percent for African-Americans, 23.2 percent for Hispanics and 11.6 percent for Asian-Americans. Overall, 14.3 percent of the U.S. population lives at or below the poverty level. <sup>6</sup>
- Although higher percentages of blacks and Hispanics are completing college than at any other time in history, whites tend to attain higher levels of education than either of those groups. In 2010, 30 percent of whites had college degrees, compared to 20 percent of blacks and 14 percent of Hispanics. Asians out-perform all other groups, with 52 percent obtaining college degrees. <sup>7</sup>

## Discrimination and the Supreme Court

The U.S. Supreme Court this year reviewed two landmark measures — involving voting rights and affirmative action — aimed at curbing or counteracting racial discrimination.

The court was asked to decide whether provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, often described as the civil rights movement's crowning achievement, are still necessary. The act was intended to counter race-based discrimination against voters in areas — mostly in the South — where discriminatory practices had been prevalent. Section 5 of the law required jurisdictions with a history of discrimination to obtain Justice Department approval before changing their voting procedures. Some 1,500 state and local laws have been deemed discriminatory and blocked under Section 5, according to Denise Lieberman, a senior attorney at the Advancement Project, a civil rights organization based in Washington, D.C.



Plaintiff Abigail Noel Fisher speaks to the media on Oct. 10, 2012, after the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in her case challenging the constitutionality of the University of Texas at Austin's practice of considering race in admissions. (Getty Images/Mark Wilson)

In a 5-4 ruling, the court said the racial environment in the country has changed enough that Section 5 is now an unnecessary burden. But defenders of the law maintain that repeal of Section 5 could endanger minority enfranchisement. <sup>8</sup>

On affirmative action, the court was asked whether a white applicant denied admission to the University of Texas in 2008 was unfairly treated under the university's affirmative action plan, a program to encourage minority admissions that grew out of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which outlawed discrimination based on race, ethnicity or gender. The plaintiff argued that the denial violated her constitutional right to equal treatment as a citizen. The university said its affirmative action policy helped ensure a diverse student body, to the benefit of the entire school. <sup>9</sup>

On June 24, the court gave a green light to race-conscious admissions policies in higher education, but only if the policies are narrowly tailored and no race-neutral alternative is

available to ensure racial and ethnic diversity.

## Growing Minorities

Today, more than a third of Americans are ethnic minorities, and the percentage is growing rapidly. In 2011, for the first time, a majority of babies born in the United States were minorities. On June 13, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that Asians were the fastest-growing race or ethnic group in the country in 2012, rising by 530,000 (or 2.9 percent) in 2011 to 18.9 million, due mostly to international immigration. The Hispanic population grew 2.2 percent, or more than 1.1 million, reaching just over 53 million. The African-American population rose 1.3 percent to 44.5 million. <sup>10</sup>

The non-Hispanic white population is projected to peak at just under 200 million in 2024, then slowly decrease, falling by more than 20 million over the subsequent 36 years. By then, the Hispanic and Asian-American populations are expected to more than double, and the black population is projected to increase by 50 percent. In 2043, the Census Bureau predicts, the United States will become a majority-minority country (though non-Hispanic whites will still be the largest single demographic group). <sup>11</sup>

This trend could have a significant impact on America's future politics, as suggested by the 2012 presidential election. Obama lost the white vote to Romney, 59 percent to 39 percent. However, the president received 80 percent of the African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic votes, allowing him to be re-elected relatively comfortably. <sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, the percentage of white voters in the United States is steadily shrinking. In 1976, whites made up 89 percent of voters; by 2012 the number had dropped to 72 percent. <sup>13</sup>

Now, the parties are in serious competition for minority voters — Republicans to win them over, Democrats to keep them loyal. Republican National Committee (RNC) Chairman Reince Priebus points to public perception of his party as composed of “stuffy old men” and plans to initiate a \$10 million RNC campaign to get the Republican message to minority communities, including “senior-level advisory councils,” to engage in dialog with Hispanic, Asian-Pacific and African-American voters. <sup>14</sup>

Democrats, meanwhile, must maintain their minority support. “It is unclear how much of the enthusiasm that Obama aroused among young adults and minorities will prove transferable to more traditional — that is, older white — candidates,” wrote William Galston, senior fellow in the Brookings Institution's governance studies program. Much of that enthusiasm, he noted, was the result of a “visceral sense of identification that will be hard to replicate — unless a young, charismatic minority candidate emerges to pick up Obama's mantle.” <sup>15</sup>

## Immigration Reform

Given the changes in the nation's demographics, both political parties have identified immigration reform as a way to present themselves as “immigrant-friendly.” Of the 40.4 million immigrants living in the United States in 2011, about 28 percent — more than 11 million — lack legal documentation, according to the Pew Research Hispanic Center. <sup>16</sup>

Obama, who in 2012 took executive action to allow hundreds of thousands of children of undocumented immigrants to remain in the United States legally, has called for “common-sense, comprehensive immigration reform,” including strengthened border security and a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. <sup>17</sup>

And it appears that Congress is ready to overcome a longstanding bitter divide on immigration issues and might act this year on a comprehensive overhaul of the nation's immigration laws for the first time since 1986. On June 10, 2013, the full Senate cleared the way to debate a bill that would tighten border security and provide a “path to citizenship” for undocumented immigrants already in the United States. Senate leaders said they hoped for a vote by July 4. <sup>18</sup>

However, the measure bill is expected to face stiff debate in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. But House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said there was “no question” that an immigration reform bill could be ready for the President's signature by the end of 2013. <sup>19</sup>

A March 2013 Pew Research Center survey showed that 71 percent of Americans believe there should be a way for undocumented immigrants to stay in the United States, and most of those people feel they should have a path to citizenship. Pew found that more Americans are inclined to believe immigrants strengthen U.S. society than burden it. <sup>20</sup>

## States Act

Meanwhile, several states are not waiting for Congress to act on immigration. In 2010 Arizona enacted state legislation aimed at driving undocumented immigrants away — for example, by requiring police to check the immigration status of any detainee they suspect of being in the country illegally. But in 2012 the Supreme Court found several of the law’s key provisions unconstitutional. Still, the law, which continues to be challenged in the lower courts, is regarded as partly responsible (along with recession-driven increases in unemployment) for the drop in the number of the state’s undocumented immigrants from 560,000 in 2008 to 360,000 in 2011. By 2011, the size of Arizona’s undocumented population had dropped from fifth among the states to ninth. <sup>21</sup>

Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina and Utah also have enacted tough immigration enforcement laws in recent years, and similar legislation has been discussed in other legislatures. So far the laws have been entirely or partially invalidated by the courts, though the rulings are being challenged. <sup>22</sup>

## A Vanishing Taboo

One measure of America’s ethnic diversification is the increase in mixed marriages. A 2012 Pew Research Center analysis of Census Bureau data showed that “about 15 percent of all new marriages in the United States in 2010 were between spouses of a different race or ethnicity from one another, more than double the share in 1980.” In 2010, only 8.4 percent of all American marriages involved spouses of different races or ethnicities. <sup>23</sup>

Pew also found that 43 percent said having more intermarriage has been a change for the better in society, while about an equal percentage said it has made no difference. Only 11 percent said it has made things worse. A strong majority — 63 percent — of Americans said it “would be fine” with them if a member of their family married someone outside their own racial or ethnic group. In 1986, only one-third of Americans viewed intermarriage as acceptable for everyone.

According to the 2010 census, 9 million Americans regard themselves as “mixed race.” Nearly 2 million of those — about 20 percent — said they were of mixed black and white heritage while 1.7 million identified themselves as white and “some other” race. <sup>24</sup>

Chronology

2011

May            The Census Bureau reports that, for the first time, most American babies younger than 1 are minorities.

2012

April           An election-year poll finds most Americans believe race relations have stagnated or deteriorated during President Obama's first term.

June            Obama issues executive order allowing some 2 million children of undocumented immigrants to stay in the United States legally. To be eligible, they must be younger than 30 and must have arrived before turning 16.

October        U.S. Supreme Court hears arguments on whether the University of Texas affirmative action plan is discriminatory.

November     Obama is re-elected. Exit polls indicate minority voters provided a sizeable portion of the margin of victory.

December     A bipartisan group of senators — four Republicans, four Democrats — begins hammering out immigration reform legislation. A Census Bureau report on Dec. 12 indicates the United States will be a "majority-minority" country by 2043, though non-Hispanic whites will remain the largest single demographic group.

2013

February      The Supreme Court hears arguments on whether election jurisdictions with a history of discrimination must continue to be monitored by the Justice Department under provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

March        Acknowledging that the GOP needs to do more to appeal to minority voters, Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus announces a campaign to get the party's message to African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics. A Pew Research Center survey shows most Americans believe undocumented immigrants already in the United States should be allowed to stay. About half believe they should have a path to citizenship.

May            After considering more than 300 amendments to the bill, Senate Judiciary Committee votes to send immigration reform legislation to full Senate.

June            Senate begins debate on immigration bill (June 11).... Census Bureau reports Asians were fastest-growing racial or ethnic minority in the United States in 2012. Supreme Court imposed limits on affirmative action policies at universities and effectively eliminated a key provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that required nine mostly Southern states and localities in several others to get preclearance from the Justice Department or a federal court in Washington before making any changes in voting or



election procedures.

#### Footnotes

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